

THE LATE MRS. C. WYLLYS BETTS OF NEW YORK CITY: ANOTHER NUMISMATIC MYSTERY PUT TO REST

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John N. Lupia's NumismaticMall.com reports that C. Wyllys Betts "married in 1879 and his wife died in 1880." This internet site is the birthplace of the Mrs. C. Wyllys Betts myth within the coin and medal collecting community, which has since been cited in several books and articles. This is how numismatic fiction becomes a numismatic fact. One person makes an incorrect statement, and others echo the story without corroborating it. Smaller details, such as this, are particularly vulnerable to numismatic lore. Here is Mr. Lupia's statement in full:

He [C. Wyllys Betts] married in 1879 and his wife died in 1880. Correspondence to Mrs. Charles Wyllys Betts, November 1879 February 1880, at their home at 361 West 23rd Street, New York, New York, are in the Reginald Allen Collection in the Gilbert and Sullivan Collection, Pierpont Morgan Library Museum, New York City, New York.

The letters were written when Sir Arthur Seymour Sullivan (1842-1900), was visiting in New York.

In 1880 he was living with his brother Frederick at 78 Irving Place, New York City, New York.

Correspondence to Betts from June 18, 1883 to May 1, 1886 is in Reginald Allen Collection in the Gilbert and Sullivan Collection, Pierpont Morgan Library Museum, New York City, New York.

Mr. Lupia cites the Morgan Library & Museum in New York City as housing the primary source documents substantiating the existence of Mrs. C. Wyllys Betts. Tucked away in the Morgan Library is most of the existing personal correspondence of the English composer Sir Arthur Seymour Sullivan, of the famous Gilbert and Sullivan musical duo.



Sir Arthur Sullivan c. 1888

Sir Arthur and C. Wyllys Betts were friends and corresponded in the mid-1880s. The Sherman Fairchild Reading Room at the Morgan Library houses some of the letters between the two men. In addition, according to the Morgan Library's online catalog, there are also letters from Arthur Sullivan to "Mrs. Charles Wyllys Betts."¹

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Title: <i>ALS → Mrs. C.W. Betts</i> <i>GSC 108275 } 3 ALS</i> <i>" 108276 }</i> <i>" 108277 }</i>	Date (and vol. no. if a periodical)	Approved:
Reader's Name (BLOCK LETTERS): <i>MERIAN for C. McDowell</i> No. 165630	Today's Date <i>20</i> <i>X</i> <i>20</i> Day Mo Yr.	Date Reshelfed:

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Morgan Library & Museum Cards relating to the author's review of the Mrs. C.W. Betts' letters

This would seem to constitute tangible evidence of the existence of Mrs. Charles Wyllys Betts—certainly, Mr. Lupia and others think so, and they can hardly be blamed for this opinion as the proof is derived from the online catalog of a distinguished library, but not, as it turns out, from an examination of the actual letters. Before discussing the letters in detail, it is useful to survey the remaining evidence, or lack thereof, regarding Mrs. C. Wyllys Betts.

A search for a marriage certificate memorializing the short-lived union turns up nothing, as does a search of contemporary wedding announcements in newspapers in New Haven and New York City. This, of course, is not dispositive of the issue. After all, Betts was a world traveler, and he may have met and married an English or French woman on one of his trips to Europe, bringing his bride back to America to live with him; however, one thing is for certain, at the time of his

¹ The Morgan Library and Museum. Arthur Sullivan autograph letters: GSC 108275, 108276, and 108277. The letters were a gift to the library from Reginald Allen. The letters cannot be viewed on the internet, just the library's summary in the online catalog.

death, Betts had no children and was unmarried. This is confirmed by his death certificate and numerous newspaper accounts published at the time of his passing. The possibility exists that his wife predeceased him; however, a search of New York's death records finds no match for a Mrs. C. Wyllys Betts. It would be helpful if we knew Mrs. Betts' first name and the lack of a full name makes any record search subject to doubt.

The tragic death of a wealthy young woman would not usually go unnoticed by the New York press corps of the time, but in this instance, no newspaper mentioned Mrs. C. Wyllys Betts' untimely demise. Maybe she died elsewhere? Maybe she returned to Europe to visit her family and died there? The game of what-ifs can go on forever—proving a negative is never easy. What other evidence is there to assist in unraveling this mystery?

Charles Wyllys Betts is buried in a family plot in Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx, New York. His headstone lists his mother and father's names but does not mention a wife, nor is she buried nearby. The man buried in the same plot as Charles Wyllys Betts, Wyllys Rossetter Betts, is not C. Wyllys Betts' son, but his nephew:



C. Wyllys Betts' headstone

Frederic Betts, C. Wyllys' older brother, is buried in the same family plot. Frederic's name appears on the obelisk opposite that of his brother. Directly below Frederic's name is the name of his beloved wife Louise (Holbrook) Betts:



Frederic H. and Louise Betts' headstone

None of C. Wyllys Betts' obituaries make mention of a marriage. On the contrary, at least one contemporary memorial describes him as never having married. At the 30th Annual Meeting of the American Numismatic and Archaeological Society in 1888, historiographer Charles Pryer read the following statement into the record:

It again becomes my sad duty to enumerate those who have been called from our society during the past year. Our losses this season have not been large in number, but those who have passed away have been quite influential amongst us. The first to be called from this sphere of action was Mr. C. Wyllys Betts, a well-known lawyer of the firm of Betts, Atterbury & Betts of New York. He died in the forty-second (*sic*) year of his age, of pneumonia, after a week's illness. The news of his death caused much surprise and great regret to his many friends in business and social circles, for he was a man of great promise and was most deservedly a favorite. C. Wyllys Betts was one of two brothers, sons of the late Frederick J. Betts, a lawyer and a man of private means, and was born at Newburgh on the Hudson. He graduated from Yale College in the Class of 1867, and subsequently from the Columbia College Law School; after he was admitted to the Bar, he began practice with his brother's firm, then Whitney & Betts. Mr. Betts never married; he was a member of the Union, Knickerbocker, University and Century clubs, the New York Bar Association, and the Seawanhaka Yacht Club. As a Numismatist Mr. Betts was well known to most of us, and a contributor to the literature of our favorite science. He had a fine collection, which his will gives, I believe, to Yale College.

(Emphasis added).

All of the circumstantial evidence that C. Wyllys Betts was a life-long bachelor may be cast aside if it can be proven that Arthur Sullivan corresponded with Mrs. C.W. Betts. According to the Morgan Library's online catalog, known as "CORSAIR," which Mr. Lupia relied upon to reach his conclusions, Sir Arthur wrote to "Mrs. C.W. Betts" between 1879 and 1880. The Morgan's librarians have collected all the Betts related correspondence from Arthur Sullivan and placed it into three file folders corresponding to the letters' recipients. These files are labeled as follows:

- 1) "Sullivan, Arthur, Betts, Mrs.;"
- 2) "Sullivan, Arthur, Betts, Mr.;" and
- 3) "Sullivan, Arthur, Betts, Wyllys."

With help from a grant by the Eric P. Newman Numismatic Education Society and the cooperation of the Morgan Library's curators, all the correspondence in these files was examined from photographic images. The initial plan was to view the letters in person in New York, but COVID-19 made the trip impossible. Sylvie Merian, the Reader Services Librarian at the Morgan Library, was extremely helpful. Once she was able to return to work after the lockdown of New York City, she prepared study images of the files and letters and sent them to this author for examination. Without her cooperation, this monograph would not have been possible.

None of the Morgan Library files is labeled with Mrs. Betts' first name. This is because none of Sir Arthur's letters use Mrs. Betts' first name. An inspection of the letters shows they are all written to "Dear Mrs. Betts." Frederic (Ric) Wilson, curator of the Morgan Library collection from 1981 to 1997, originally cataloged Sullivan's letters. Mr. Wilson, who went on to work at

Harvard before his death in 2010, correctly cataloged the letters as being addressed to “Mrs. Betts,” not “Mrs. C.W. Betts.” However, at a later date, an unknown person prepared the record for the library’s CORSAIR online catalog. When the information was cataloged on CORSAIR, someone assumed that the letters to “Mrs. Betts” were written to “Mrs. C. W. Betts,” and cataloged them as such. This must have seemed logical at the time. After all, there are letters to “Wyllys Betts” and “Mr. Betts;” therefore, the letters to Mrs. Betts must be to the wife of C. Wyllys Betts. But is this assumption supported by the evidence?

As confirmed by the New York City Directory, upon graduating from law school at Columbia University in 1869, C. Wyllys Betts lived with his brother Frederic and Frederic’s wife Louise (Holbrook) Betts (1847-1925) at 104 East 19th Street. The three lived at that address until the Frederic Betts family moved to 78 Irving Place, New York City, in 1877. From 1877 until 1887, the New York City Directory lists Charles Wyllys Betts’ address as 78 Irving Place—the same address where his brother and sister-in-law lived. The 1880 United States Census corroborates this fact. It records Charles Wyllys Betts living with his brother’s extended family at 78 Irving Place. The 1880 Census does not record a Mrs. C. Wyllys Betts living with them; thus, if she existed, she was either already dead, lived elsewhere, or the marriage had not yet taken place. Further, the 1880 Census had a box to mark if a person was single, married, or widowed/divorced. The box next to C. Wyllys Betts’ name is checked “single.”

In addition to the census and directory information, contemporary newspaper accounts show that C. Wyllys Betts lived with his brother and sister-in-law. On April 29, 1887, both the *New York Tribune* and the *New York Herald* reported that C. Wyllys Betts died the previous day and that at the time of his death, he was unmarried and living with his brother at 78 Irving Place. Similarly, C. Wyllys Betts’ 1887 death certificate (NY Death Certificate No. 599890) lists him as “single,” not widowed, and his address as “78 Irving Place, Ward 17 18 B.” Although C. Wyllys Betts owned numerous homes in New Haven and the Hamptons, from 1869 to the day of his death in 1887, his primary residence was always the same as that of his brother and sister-in-law; his death certificate lists him as a resident of New York City for twenty years.

According to Mr. Lupia, correspondence was sent by Arthur Sullivan “to Mrs. Charles Wyllys Betts, November 1879 February 1880, at their home at 361 West 23rd Street, New York, New York.” C. Wyllys Betts did not live at or ever own the house at 361 West 23rd Street, and there is no evidence his alleged wife did either. The home was that of David Beach Grant of the Grant Locomotive Works. Arthur Sullivan was a guest of Mr. and Mrs. Grant and stayed with them while in New York City in 1885. One of the letters in the Morgan Library² originated *from* 361 West 23rd Street; it was not sent *to* Mr. and Mrs. Betts at that address.

² The letter, accession number GSC 108276, signed by Arthur Sullivan, is written on letterhead with the address “361 Twenty Third Street West” at the top.



David Beach Grant's home at 361 West 23rd Street, New York City

C.W. Betts was very close to his brother and sister-in-law; he and Frederic were law partners, and Wyllys bequeathed much of his estate to Frederic and Louise. Wyllys called Louise his "sister" in his will. It was not uncommon in upper society during this time to address your brother's wife with whom you were particularly close as "sister." Louise and Frederic were married in 1867 and named one of their sons Wyllys Rossetter Betts (1875-1932)—this is the man who was later buried in the same family plot as C.W. Betts. In his will, C.W. Betts made several notable bequests to young Wyllys R. Betts, including a house in the Hamptons, but Wyllys R. Betts was his nephew, not his son, of this there is no doubt.

C.W. Betts was a patron of the arts and possessed a fine voice. He was for many years a member of New York's Trinity Church choir. Louise Betts shared her brother-in-law's love of singing and the arts. She is said to have presented musicals at her home and regularly attended the opera and concerts in New York City. Fabulously wealthy, Mrs. Louise Betts' home was exquisitely run by a butler, footmen, and European maids and staff. She traveled in the highest circles of New York society; however, it was not Louise and Wyllys' love of music that brought them together with Sir Arthur Sullivan. Instead, it was Sir Arthur's mistress Mary Frances "Fanny" (Carter) Ronalds (1839–1916), who was the common denominator. Fanny Ronalds grew up with Louise Betts in Boston, where their fathers were partners in the dry goods business of Holbrook Carter & Co. Although Fanny was seven years older than Louise, their homes were very close, and they undoubtedly knew one another as children. Indeed, evidence suggests they were cousins. This belief is supported by at least one newspaper account—the *Buffalo Commercial* repeated a story originally reported in the *New York Sun* on September 1, 1885, that Mrs. Ronalds visited Mrs. Frederick Betts in Southampton.

—Among other notable arrivals is Mrs. Ronalds, who has not been in her own country for several years. Mrs. Ronalds looks as young, and is in every way as charming as when she first fascinated the Emperor Louis Napoleon in the Bois de Bologne. She is now on a visit to Mrs. Frederick Betts in Southampton.—*New York Sun*.

1885 newspaper account of Mrs. Ronalds visiting Mrs. Frederick Betts

Fanny Ronalds lived an unconventional and somewhat notorious life for a Victorian Era woman; a noted beauty, accomplished amateur singer, and socialite, she was married to the extraordinarily wealthy Pierre Lorillard Ronalds, of the Lorillard tobacco fortune, in 1859. Around 1867, she separated from him but never obtained a legal divorce. The next year, she entered into a relationship with Winston Churchill's grandfather, Leonard Jerome, following him to Paris in 1868. There she was introduced to the pleasure-loving Empress Eugénie and the womanizing Napoleon III, with whom she was well-acquainted. Indeed, it has been suggested that she received a pension from the Emperor; what services she performed to justify such a gift can only be imagined. With the French Empire waning, she moved across the Channel in 1870, where she became one of the many mistresses of the Prince of Wales (the future king, Edward VII). It was during this time that she met Sir Arthur Sullivan. She would maintain a clandestine, illicit, and intimate relationship with him for many years until his death in 1900. Sir Arthur was completely taken in by Mrs. Ronalds' charm. He left her \$250,000 in his will, one-third of his estate, and several personal objects. One item, a signed original copy of the musical score to *The Lost Chord*, was so dear to her that when in the fullness of time she followed him to the grave, the manuscript was, by her instruction, buried with her.³



Fanny Ronalds 1889

Louise Betts was not the only one in the Betts household on friendly terms with “cousin” Fanny. C. Wyllys Betts was close to her too. On August 25, 1885, he attended the opening performance of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*. Present in the proscenium box with him was Mrs. Ronalds and the Duke of Marino. In the adjoining box were the Duchess of Marino, Miss

³ Fanny Ronalds was closely associated with *The Lost Chord*. The first phonograph record played in England was that of Mrs. Ronalds singing *The Lost Chord*. It was played in Arthur Sullivan's drawing room with all of London's musical society present to hear the new invention. As the first notes rang out, nearly a hundred people stared at one another in blank amazement. No one spoke. Sullivan said that she alone brought tears to his eyes with his own notes.

Harcourt, and the Messrs. Ronalds (most likely Fanny's two sons, not her husband). Arthur Sullivan would have arranged these premium tickets.

The audiences at the opening performances of the "Mikado" at the Fifth Avenue Theatre were decidedly fashionable in appearance, reminding one of the height of the winter season. The Casino and Wallack's have also come in for their share of patronage, although to a certain degree more strangers have been seen at those houses, owing to the fact that "Nanon" and the "Black Hussar" have had a long run, and now that so many houses are open, this cool weather comes just in time to revive a drooping industry. Mrs. Ronalds, who looked very charming in a light blue silk, with bonnet to match, sat in one of the proscenium boxes at the Fifth Avenue Theatre this evening, and in her party were the Duke of Marino and Mr. C. Wyllys Betts. In the adjoining box were the Duchess of Marino, Miss Harcourt and the Messrs. Ronalds. There were many familiar faces at the Standard Theatre tonight to witness Mr. Duff's version of the "Mikado." Mr. McCaull and the Aronson brothers, with Herr Conreid, sat in boxes on opposite sides of the house, and in the auditorium were Mr. and Mrs. John T. Raymond, Miss Gertrude Orme, Aunt Louisa Eldredge.

August 26, 1885, story appearing in the Boston Globe concerning *The Mikado's* opening night.

We know from Betts classic numismatic work *American Colonial History Illustrated by Contemporary Medals* that he visited the National Library in Paris and the Paris Mint in the 1880s, where he was granted full access to their collections of medals and dies. What we did not know until now was that he had a companion on that trip. In his diary on August 16, 1886, Arthur Sullivan wrote that "Mrs. Ronalds and Wyllys went off to Paris." That C. Wyllys Betts was in Paris with one of the world's most beautiful, charming, and scandalous women as his escort places the voyage in an entirely new light. With Mrs. Ronalds at his side, Betts would have been given unprecedented access to anything he desired in Paris. One thing Fanny Ronalds was not, however, was C. Wyllys Betts' wife; although she was technically married, she was no man's wife. There is also little evidence to suggest that Mrs. Ronalds and C. Wyllys Betts were anything more than friends. Regardless, the studious Betts and worldly Mrs. Ronalds must have made an odd couple.

This brings us back to the letters in the Morgan Library. On November 5, 1879, Gilbert and Sullivan visited America to oversee several operatic productions and complete *The Pirates of Penzance*. According to Arthur Sullivan's biographer, Arthur Jacobs, the musical duo "were immediately received in New York as celebrities."⁴ Jacobs suggests that, "Sullivan's plans to visit America naturally involved Fanny Ronalds."⁵ His diary entry on December 17, 1879, records his first known interaction with the Betts family, it states, "Went to rehearsal 11-4. Came home tired. Couldn't work. Dined at the Betts. Then home...." This meal would have been at the Betts' mansion at 78 Irving Place. In attendance would have been Wyllys, Frederic,⁶ and Louise.

⁴ Arthur Jacobs, *Arthur Sullivan A Victorian Musician*, Oxford Univ. Press, 1984, p. 127.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 124.

⁶ On November 27, 1900, Frederic Betts wrote a letter to "Dear Fanny," in which he expresses his condolences to her at the passing of Arthur Sullivan on November 22. The letter is written on Frederic's law firm letterhead and indicates that Frederic was assisting Fanny with legal issues concerning her husband. The letter is signed, "Yours affectionately, Frederic Betts." Accession number GSC 106171 within the Morgan Library's collection.

There are three letters to “My dear Mrs. Betts,” two to “My dear Betts,” two to “Dear Wyllys,” and one to “My dear Wyllys” in the Morgan Library’s collection. As noted earlier, none are to “Mrs. C.W. Betts” as erroneously indicated by the online catalog. It appears that since all the letters were going to the same address, Sir Arthur distinguished the recipients by addressing Charles Wyllys Betts as “Wyllys,” Frederic H. Betts as “Betts” or “Mr. Betts,” and Louise Betts as “Mrs. Betts.” The two Dear Wyllys letters are undated and seem to relate to dinner invitations, one of which ends with “Don’t forget my kindest remembrances to Mr. & Mrs. Betts.” From the context, Mr. and Mrs. Betts are Frederic and Louise. In the letter to “My dear Wyllys” dated May 1, 1886, Sullivan, who was never at a loss for good manners, concluded, “Kindest regard to your brother and Mrs. Betts.” Again, this is Frederic and Louise.

In reverse chronological order, the first of the three letters to “Mrs. Betts” was written from 361 Twenty Third Street. It is undated but was most likely penned in August 1885. Sullivan stayed at 361 23rd St. during his 1885 visit to New York. The letter apologizes for not coming to see Mrs. Betts and indicates he was going to Boston (Sullivan traveled to Boston in August/September 1885). The brief letter concludes with “kind remembrances to Mr. Betts....”⁷ There is no reason to believe this letter is to anyone other than Louise Betts, and “Mr. Betts” is a reference to her husband, Frederic.

In the next letter, which is undated and addressed to “Dear Mrs. Betts,” Sullivan apologizes for not answering Mrs. Betts’ letter to him and indicates he is uncertain if he can accept her invitation because he is involved in rehearsals every day and every night with the companies that are “going out with the ‘Pirates’, & I fear I cannot get off....”⁸ The famous Gilbert and Sullivan comic opera *The Pirates of Penzance* premiered in New York on December 31, 1879—the only Gilbert and Sullivan opera to premiere in America. After the premiere, Gilbert and Sullivan immediately trained four companies to tour America performing the production; this was hastily done before unscrupulous theaters stole the musical score without paying royalties. Therefore, this letter dates to around January 1880. There is nothing in the letter that would lead anyone to believe that it was written to anyone other than Louise Betts, whose home Sullivan had visited weeks before.

The final “Dear Mrs. Betts” letter is undated and only two sentences long.⁹ It is an acceptance of a dinner invitation. However, the letter mentions that Sullivan is sending the “Polka, with an alteration or two in it. If God improves it, he had better let me see the proof.”¹⁰ This is most likely a reference to a part of the musical score to *Pirates of Penzance*. If Sullivan was still working on the score, it dates the letter to mid-December 1879. Louise Betts was an accomplished singer and would have been able to read the sheet music.

The letters to Mrs. Betts in the Morgan Library from Arthur Sullivan were written in 1879, early 1880, and 1885. As such, if “Mrs. Betts” was C. Wyllys Betts’ wife, the 1880 federal census

⁷ These letters are quoted with the permission of the Morgan Library and Museum. This first letter is identified as accession number GSC 108276 within the Morgan Library collection.

⁸ This letter is identified as accession number GSC 108277.

⁹ This letter is identified as accession number GSC 108275.

¹⁰ Arthur Sullivan’s handwriting is difficult to read at times, and there are alternative transcriptions of this sentence. It could say, “If Pond engraves” instead of “If God improves.” In either case, the overall meaning of this paragraph for the purposes of this article is unchanged.

should have recorded him as “married” instead of “single.”¹¹ No individual piece of evidence disproving the existence of Mrs. C.W. Betts is conclusive; however, the cumulative effect of all the documentary evidence (or lack thereof) taken together is dispositive—there never was a Mrs. C.W. Betts. None of the Arthur Sullivan letters to “Mrs. Betts” in the Morgan Library were written to Mrs. C. Wyllys Betts as stated in the online catalog.¹² All of the “Mrs. Betts” letters were written to Louise Betts, C. Wyllys Betts’ sister-in-law, with whom he lived for nearly twenty years.

One hopes this monograph drives a stake through the heart of the Mrs. C. Wyllys Betts myth. However, until all mention of her is removed from the internet, she lives on in cyberspace, proving conclusively that you can’t believe everything you read on the internet.¹³

¹¹ Census Day for the 1880 federal census was June 1, 1880.

¹² A draft of this monograph was submitted to the Morgan Library for review. The library acknowledged that an error was made. All indications are that the Morgan will remove any reference to “Mrs. Charles Wyllys Betts” from its online CORSAIR catalog. Accordingly, by the time this article is published, the Morgan Library’s reference to Arthur Sullivan’s letters to “Mrs. Charles Wyllys Betts” may no longer be visible.

¹³ A draft of this monograph was submitted to John N. Lupia for his review and comment. Although Mr. Lupia could not point to any evidence supporting the existence of Mrs. C.W. Betts other than what he once viewed on the Morgan Library’s online catalog (he never viewed the actual letters), he stands by the information on his website. In an email dated 11/24/2020, Mr. Lupia wrote, “[t]he staff at the Morgan has a world class reputation for meticulous detail and accuracy and NEVER for making false assumptions as your essay appears to indicate as to whoever catalogued the ALS into the Corsair System” (emphasis in original). In reply to Mr. Lupia, see footnote 12.